SIEUR DE LA VERENDRYE

AND HIS SONS,

THE

DISCOVERERS OF THE

ROCKY MOUNTAINS,

By way of Lakes Superior and Winnipeg, and Rivers Assineboin and Missouri.

"If I succeed, as I hope, I shall have the pleasure and consolation of having rendered a good service to geography, to religion, and to the state"—*Bobe to DeL'Isle, March, 1716.*

BY

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SIEUR DE LA VERENDRYE.

Three-Rivers, at the confluence of the St. Maurice with the St. Lawrence, ninety miles from Quebec, is one of the oldest hamlets of Canada. A wedding here took place on September 26, 1667, which received some notice at the time. On that day, Marie Boucher, the daughter of the governor of the village, and only twelve years of age, was made the wife of Lt. Rene Gaultier Varennes.

The son-in-law soon succeeded Boucher, and for twenty-two years was the governor of Three-Rivers, and one of his sons, Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, was the Sieur de la Verendrye, the subject of this paper, and the first European explorer of a northern route to the Rocky Mountains.

When a young man, he joined, in 1697, a war expedition against New England, and in 1705 was fighting with the French army in Flanders. Returning to Canada, he identified himself with the opening of the great unknown West.

In 1716, Bobe, a learned priest at Versailles, who had exposed the deception of Lahontan in placing Long River on his map, was constantly urging the French government to search for a northern route to the Pacific. On the 15th of March, 1716, he wrote to De L'Isle, geographer of the Academy of Science at Paris: "They tell me that among the Scioux of the Mississippi,

1. Parkman's "Old Regime in Canada," p. 227.

there are always Frenchmen trading; that the course of the Mississippi is from north to west and from west to south; that it is known that toward the source there is in the highlands a a river that leads to the western ocean. * * * * * For the last two years I torment exceedingly the Governor-General, Mr. Raudot, and M. Duche, to endeavor to discover this ocean. If I succeed as I hope, we shall have tidings before three years, and I shall have the pleasure and the consolation of having rendered a good service to geography, to religion, and to the state."[2]

His importunity received its reward, and in 1717, the post erected by DuLuth in 1678, at the head of Lake Superior, near the mouth of the Kamanistigoya, was re-established by Lieut. Robertel de la Noue, and, in 1727, another built among the Sioux, with a view to pushing westward the power of France.

Verendrye, in 1728, was stationed at Lake Nepigon, whose waters flow into Lake Superior from the north.[3] While here, the Indians were so positive relative to a river which flowed toward a sea of the west, that he resolved to make an exploration. At Mackinaw, while on his way to confer with the Governor of Canada upon the subject, Father du Gonor arrived from the post which had been established among the Sioux, nearly opposite Maiden Rock, on the shores of Lake Pepin. After an interchange of views, the priest promised to assist him, as far as he could, in obtaining a permit and outfit for the establishment of a post among the "Cristinaux," or the "Assiniboels," from which to go farther west.[4]

2. Historical Magazine, New York. August, 1859.

3. For many of the facts of this article, I am indebted to two articles of Pierre Margry, published in "*Moniteur Universel.*"

4. The Jesuit du Gonor, with his associate Guignas, came to Lake Pepin with La Perriere Boucher, who had made himself notorious in Massachusetts, by leading the Indian attack on Haverhill. They arrived on Sept. 17, 1727, and erected Fort Beauharnois, opposite Maiden's Rock on a low point. In the spring of 1728, the water rose two feet and eight inches above the floors of the post. Below Lake Pepin, in 1683, Perrot established a post. Above Lake Pepin, on Prairie Island, a stockade was erected in 1695. On a creek of the Blue Earth, not far from Mankahto, LeSuer had a post in 1700.

Charles de Beauharnois, then Governor of Canada, gave him a respectful hearing, and carefully examined the map of the region west of the great lakes, which had been drawn by Otchaga, the Indian guide of Verendrye. Orders were soon given to fit out an expedition of fifty men. It left Montreal in 1731, under the conduct of his sons and nephew, he not joining the party till 1733, in consequence of the detentions of business.

In the Autumn of 1731, the party reached Rainy Lake, by the Nantouagan, or Groselliers river, now called Pigeon.[5] Father Messayer, who had been stationed on Lake Superior, at the Groselliers river, was taken as a spiritual guide. At the foot of Rainy Lake a post was erected and called Fort St. Pierre, and the next year, having crossed Minnittie, or Lake of the Woods, they established Fort St. Charles on its south-western bank. Five leagues from Lake Winnipeg they established a post on the Assiniboine.[6] The river Winnipeg, called by them Maurepas, in honor of the minister of France in 1734, was protected by a fort of the same name.

About this time their advance was stopped by the exhaustion of supplies, but on the 12th of April, 1735, an arrangement was made for a second equipment, and a fourth son joined the expedition.

In June, 1736, while twenty-one of the expedition were camped upon an isle in the Lake of the Woods, they were surprised by a band of Sioux, hostile to the French allies, the Cristinaux, and all killed. The island upon this account is called in the early maps, Massacre Island. A few days after, a

5. Groselliers and Radisson, adventurous fur traders, about the year 1660, went by the Grand Portage to Lake Winnipeg, and were the first Europeans to go from thence to the bottom of Hudson's Bay. It has been said that the river was called after the trader, but it may be after the wild gooseberry bush, *Groseillier*.

6. Named from the Assineeboins, a separate band of the Sioux, or Dakotahs, and known among themselves as Hohays, Fish Netters. The Chippeways call them Asseenay Bwans, Stones Sioux. Living on the wide prairies, they were for the want of fuel obliged to cook their fish by warming the water with hot stones.

A Jesuit Relation written more than two hundred years ago, says: "As wood is very scarce and small with them, nature has taught them to burn stones in place of it, and to cover their wigwams with skins. Some have built mud cabins nearly in the same manner as swallows build their nests."

party of five Canadian voyageurs discovered their dead bodies and scalped heads. Father Ouneau the missionary, was found upon one knee, an arrow in his head, his breast bare, his left hand touching the ground, and the right hand raised.

Among the slaughtered was also a son of Verendrye, who had a tomahawk in his back, and his body adorned with garters and bracelets of porcupine. The father was at the foot of the Lake of the Woods when he received the news of his son's murder, and about the same time heard of the death of his enterprising nephew Dufrost de la Jemerays, the son of his sister Marie Reine de Varennes, and brother of Madame Youville, the foundress of the Hospitaliers at Montreal.[7]

It was under the guidance of the latter that the party had, in 1731, mastered the difficulties of the Nantaouagon, or Groselliers river.

On the 3d of October, 1738, they built an advanced post, Fort La Reine, on the river Assiniboels, which they called St. Charles, and beyond was a branch called St. Pierre. These two rivers received the baptismal name of Verendrye, which was Pierre, and Governor Beauharnois, which was Charles. The post became the centre of trade and point of departure for explorations, either north or south.

It was by ascending the Assiniboine, and by the present trail from its tributary Mouse river, they reached the country of the Mantanes,[8] and in 1742, came to the upper Missouri, passed the Yellow Stone, and at length arrived at the Rocky Mountains.

7. The Indians have a tradition of this occurrence. They state that early one morning a French canoe with eight men, left a trading house which the French had built about the middle of the Lake of the Woods, and stopped upon an island near the last pass to enter the river of Rainy Lake The atmosphere was so still that the wind could hardly be felt. Having built a fire, the smoke was perceived by Sioux warriors, who approached and landed, unperceived, on the opposite side of the isle and massacred the missionary and party.—*Belcourt in Minn. Hist. Soc. Annals, 1853.*

8. The Mandans, or White Beards, of the Dakotah family, are noted for being grey-haired. Sometimes children six years of age have this appearance. They were nearly destroyed by Small Pox in 1837, and in 1874 they lived near the Arickarees and Gros Ventres, in the vicinity of Fort Berthold, on the Missouri. Formerly all dwelt in mud cabins surrounded by ditches. A few yet live in dirt lodges.

The party was led by the eldest son and his brother the chevalier. They left the Lake of the Woods on the 29th of April, 1742, came in sight of the Rocky Mountains on the 1st of January, 1743, and on the 12th ascended them. On the route they fell in with the Beaux Hommes, Pioya, Petits Renards, and Arc tribes, and stopped among the Snake tribe, but could go no farther in a southerly direction owing to a war between the Arcs and Snakes.[9]

On the 19th of May, 1744, they had returned to the upper Missouri, and in the country of the Petite Cerise[10] tribe, they planted on an eminence a leaden plate of the arms of France, and raised a monument of stones, which they called Beauharnois. They returned to the Lake of the Woods on the 2d of July.

North of the Assiniboine they proceeded to Lake Dauphin, Swan's Lake, explored the river "Des Biches," and ascended even to the fork of the Saskatchewan, which they called Poskoiac. Two forts were subsequently established, one near Lake Dauphin, and the other on the river "des Biches," called Fort Bourbon. The northern route, by the Saskatchewan, was thought to have some advantage over the Missouri, because there was no danger of meeting with the Spaniards.

Governor Beauharnois having been prejudiced against Verendrye by envious persons, De Noyelles was appointed to take command of the posts. During these difficulties, we find Sieur de la Verendrye, Jr., engaged in other duties. In August, 1747, he arrives from Mackinaw at Montreal, and in the autumn of that year he accompanies St. Pierre to Mackinaw, and brings back the convoy to Montreal. In February, 1748, with five Canadians, five Cristenaux, two Ottawas, and one

9. The Arcs may be the Aricarees. The first attempt to trace the Upper Missouri, is on DeL'Isle's Map of Louisiana, and on it the "Aricaras" are marked as dwelling north of the Pawnees. They speak the same language. In 1874 they lived near Fort Berthold, and were about 900 in nnmber.

10. Petite Cerise—Choke-cherry.